

'I'VE HAD ENOUGH SUICIDE!'

It's been a series of back-to-back movies for Mel . . . now it's time to take a break



HAVING just finished work on the film *Hamlet*, Mel Gibson is adamant — he's taking a year off.

"You work because you want to work and you're hungry," he tells TV WEEK, fidgeting in his chair in a plush Los Angeles hotel suite. "Then you wait till you're full and you take a break. You have to take a break, to do the things that you work for, or you couldn't survive."

"Also," he adds with a grin, "you can oversaturate a potential audience and that's what I may have done right now."

LEFT: A long way from *Hamlet* . . . Mel Gibson takes to the skies in a scene from *Air America*.

“I don’t think most Americans even knew that Air America existed, and that interested me”

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



Fans of the heart-throb actor would tend to disagree.

Although Mel has been working on back-to-back films since *Lethal Weapon 2* — *Bird On A Wire*, *Air America* (released this week in Australia) and *Hamlet*, which he’s just finished — box-office figures show that audiences just can’t get enough of him.

Nevertheless, the 35-year-old American-born Australian resident since age 12 (“I’m a citizen of the world,” he says) is winging his way home to his property in NSW with his wife of 10 years, Robyn, and their six children (all under the age of nine), who have been travelling

with him to film locations for the past two years.

“A holiday is the only future I can see right now,” he says. “I’ve had enough suicide!”

The “suicide” Mel is referring to comes from his five-month shoot in London playing *Hamlet*, a task the actor still nervously admits he’s not sure was successful.

“There are moments playing *Hamlet* that make you want to rip your hair out,” he says, “because he is the most confounding character ever written. The only consistent thing about *Hamlet* is his inconsistency, and you’re chasing your tail. You feel like you’re going

ABOVE: Mel as crazy pilot Gene Ryack, who flew for the CIA’s secret airline in Laos during the Vietnam War.

mad — and you do, a little bit. It’s beaten many actors and it may have beaten me, too — I won’t know till I see it all cut together.”

In *Air America*, Mel returns to a character more reminiscent of Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon* — a crazy pilot flying for the CIA’s secret airline in Laos during the Vietnam War.

As Gene Ryack, Mel teams up with Robert Downey jr., who plays co-pilot Billy Covington, and the

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pair learn to laugh in the face of absurdity, airlifting everything from refugees and drug warlords to live grenades and grunting pigs.

The movie is based on a book by Christopher Robbins about the real Air America and Mel says he was able to talk to some former pilots about their own experiences in a war that technically didn't exist.

"Our stunt co-ordinator on the film was involved with Air America and he tells some great stories," Mel says.

"The story intrigued me. I don't think most Americans even knew that Air America existed, and that interested me."

Mel makes it clear talking to TV WEEK that he would hate his reported multi-million dollar salaries (he was rumored to have been paid \$7 million for Air America and a large percentage of the \$300 million worldwide gross of Lethal Weapon 2) to stand in the way of a good role.

"I'd like to do an Australian film but I don't know what just yet," he says. "I'll definitely have a try at something one of these days."

Mel says he doesn't consider his huge overseas salaries a setback for these plans.

"You make allowances for salaries," he explains.

"We just did Hamlet and it's unrealistic to think that you can pump millions of dollars into a production of Shakespeare, because the chances of getting it all back are next to nothing."

"That's an example where, if something is that great and you have an opportunity to be involved, I took for practically nothing."

"I'm certainly not in it for the money!" he adds with a grin.

Mel has never been an actor known for taking himself too seriously. When he was named by America's People Magazine as "Sexiest Man Alive", his comment was: "That implies there are a lot of dead guys who got more points than I did!" Another time, discussing poses with a Hollywood photographer who wanted pool-side shots, Mel cracked: "How about if I just walk on water?"



Although he's nicknamed "Mad Mel", he seems subdued, busily biting his nails and looking uncomfortable with having to talk about himself.

According to Air America producer Daniel Melnick, it's Mel's "ordinary bloke" qualities that are a large part of his appeal.

"Mel is a wonderful actor — a serious actor but a wildly funny, original guy," Daniel tells TV WEEK. "The only thing Mel demands is that he's treated like everybody else. He doesn't want star treatment — he eats in the hot sun during lunch breaks with everybody else and he's most comfortable standing around talking with the cast and crew."

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Mel, who screws up his face at such comments, reluctantly admits that he does care what people think about him.

"You must pay attention to what people think of you," he says, "because it's part of your job to come from nowhere. The minute you get found out is the minute you go off the boil and I'm very concerned with longevity of career."

Mel also seems resigned to the fact that the media are interested in other, more embarrassing, aspects of his acting career — as illustrated during the much-reported rumor that he had a "stunt butt" used for a shot of his behind in the film Bird On A Wire.

"I ain't saying," he begins, with

● ABOVE: Mel with co-star Robert Downey jnr... the pair learn to laugh in the face of absurdity.

an embarrassed grin, "Not after I saw the shot of his butt with a forest of hair — it looked like a relief map of the rainforest, backlit and everything! I disowned it!"

Although fame has brought fear into the lives of many celebrities who are harassed by overzealous fans, Mel takes it all in his stride.

"I've gotten some hate mail and that's fun to read," he says with a grin. "There really are sick people in the world who take exception to funny films."

"But the way I see it, if they're going to write it, it's a good sign. It's the one that doesn't write — that just does — you have to worry about, and what are you going to do about that?"

"I try to protect my family as much as possible, of course, but I mustn't worry about these things too much."

Although the media like to portray Mel as a part-time actor whose real job is farming, he is quick to disagree.

"Acting is my real job — it's the job I like the most and feel most comfortable and competent in," Mel says. "I don't feel particularly competent in the cattle management business!"

"I'll do the laboring jobs when I'm home and I have another guy who works for me and I help him dig the fence-holes."

"Actually, the other guy is the boss," Mel adds with a laugh, "which is a lucky thing, because I'd screw it up!"

From Jenny Cooney in Los Angeles

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